

Bush's Unrealpolitik

By Elliott Abrams

WASHINGTON

Is there a "Bush approach" to the conduct of foreign affairs? Watching the President struggle with the crisis in Lithuania, the answer appears to be yes: the President's approach is an attempt to combine a form of "realpolitik" with heavy reliance on personal relations among national leaders.

A pattern has emerged strongly in the Administration's first 15 months, in response to events in China, Nicaragua and Lithuania.

First, business is usually conducted between a small group within our Government and a small group of foreign leaders. The importance of personal relations among these leaders is inevitably magnified, and "maintaining our ties" to "build good will" with Deng Xiaoping, Mikhail Gorbachev and others becomes critical. Indeed, the building and retaining of those personal ties seems to be the main policy goal, and the substance of policy becomes secondary to the personal side.

The dangers of this approach are clear. We are dealing with unelected, precariously placed, sometimes aged individuals whose political or physical lifespans are in doubt.

When we define our Soviet policy as little more than backing Mr. Gorbachev, we run the risk of a massive policy defeat if he should fall. Realizing this, the Administration's investment in him becomes larger and larger, perversely giving him more and more leverage over us the weaker he gets. Eventually we find ourselves at the point of self-censorship, as the deputy national security adviser, Robert Gates, found out when he was prevented from stating the obvious about Mr. Gorbachev's shaky future.

It may have been sensible for the President to believe that his personal acquaintance with China's leaders would enable him to encourage reforms unattainable through a policy of public criticism. Nevertheless, he has failed; China is more repressive now than when he started.

The tough old Communists who rule China have none of our sentimentality when it comes to friendships among leaders. It would never occur to them to temper a policy on purely personal grounds. Pulling our punches after Tiananmen Square has served only to dishearten and weaken

the democratic opposition, while comforting the party bosses.

It cannot be correct policy to muffle our support for those who represent our true interest in China — its modernization and democratization — in order to maintain smooth relations with an elderly party elite dedicated to preserving their monopoly on power.

To this excessive personalization of foreign affairs is added a peculiar return to "realpolitik" — the view that the international system revolves around the unprincipled use of power by nation states. It is peculiar because it comes at a moment of staggering success for the ideas that America represents. As democracy

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triumphs, and the thirst for it around the globe is more and more manifest, we waffle about supporting freedom movements in Lithuania and China.

Most striking is the joylessness of the Administration's reaction to democratic pressures in both countries. Instead we see a thin smile and a public stance conveying as much solicitude for our "friends" in the Soviet and Chinese hierarchies as enthusiasm for the marchers in the streets. Occasionally the White House evinces a "them and us" attitude that displays more solidarity with rulers beset by 'troublemakers' than with democrats East and West struggling against oppression.

The Nicaraguan situation is different, but here as well we are reluctant to commit ourselves to policy principles. The President's absolute silence about the contras was deafening: not a word of gratitude to the men who fought and died advancing the policy he actively supported for eight years.

What lessons have we learned from Nicaragua? Did backing an armed rebellion pay off in democracy, or was it all a big mistake? The President's answer to this question is not academic, for it will tell Jonas Savimbi in Angola, Son Sann in Cambodia and others similarly situated a good deal about their future. Yet the

Administration will not speak to the point. It's as if policy itself were a mistake, likely to get in the way of the flexibility needed to conduct foreign relations.

Similarly, the President seems to believe that "realpolitik" requires him to resist moral judgments on other international actors. This principle extends beyond Lithuania and Tiananmen Square to even the recent case of Iraq's aggressive actions — including the threat to conduct chemical warfare once again. This elicited from him no condemnation tougher than the word "bad."

Conversely, nations such as Israel, whose ties with the U.S. are based precisely on moral judgments, find themselves in hot water if their behavior gets in the way of an Administration maneuver. It's as if moral judgments of nations and leaders are thought juvenile or unprofessional, blunders to be avoided because they get in the way of tactical flexibility.

In truth, this is not "realpolitik," which requires both realism and policy. The Administration has borrowed from "realpolitik" an evasion of principle, but has substituted personalized diplomacy for the concrete approach realpolitik demands.

So there is a double mistake: no clear policies, no clear principles. When realpolitik is defined as avoiding consistent and principled policy approaches almost as a matter of principle, it is a formula for trouble. When American support for democracy is compromised by investments in the fate of foreign autocrats, our greatest asset is being sold short at the moment when the market for it is at a historic high.

After over a year in office, the Administration has yet to draw its actions together into a logical whole. Leaders will come and go, but we still face the new world scene without a coherent and principled foreign policy. We have neither defined the world we want to see emerge, nor said how we plan to get there. □

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